

National Terrorism Threat Level

Q&A with Director-General of Security Mike Burgess and Minister for Home Affairs Clare O'Neil

JOURNALIST: inaudible

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY MIKE BURGESS:

Thank you. So yes, I've said espionage and foreign interference supplants terrorism as our nation's principal security concern. But of course, terrorism will remain a priority for my organisation. It's a threat to life, and therefore we get the full attention. So the operational tempo is as high as it needs to be when we see indications of threat to life.

Of course, the number of cases that we are investigating has moderated. But whenever we come across people with violent extremist belief and we're assessing the threats to security they present, that gets the full press and operational tempo from my organisation.

JOURNALIST: inaudible

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY MIKE BURGESS:

And you'd appreciate we don't talk about the exact numbers other than to say our case level has moderated. And that's part of the reason why the threat level is being lowered.

JOURNALIST: inaudible

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY MIKE BURGESS:

I don't think anyone has said anyone has been refused at this point. And to be clear, ASIO assessment is on the individuals and the threat they pose. That's not pass or fail, that's just telling the threat they pose. The other thing I would say the entire cohort that we have assessed and we have assessed the entire cohort return of all those individuals would not materially change the national terrorism threat level.

Of course, for some it may require my organisation to keep an eye on them, but that's okay because I'll back my organisation any day.

JOURNALIST: inaudible

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY MIKE BURGESS:

Good question. I can't give you the exact number, but there's I mean, there are tens orders in many tens that actually that we are aware of. Some of them we know where they are. Some of them we don't know where they are. My team will correct me right as I'm speaking. They are welcome to hold up the hands and tell me the answer to that question.

JOURNALIST: inaudible

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY MIKE BURGESS:

No, I'm not going to comment on actually what decisions are before government or what government is working through other than to say, my agency gives advice on the threats individuals pose, and we've done that for the entire cohort. There are other factors, of course, in play that are not for ASIO to make a call on.

JOURNALIST: inaudible

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY MIKE BURGESS:

So we do speak to the children if their parents are there and give us permission to do that. Of course,

we are aware of who the children are, but the children are not our focus, unless of course, we see them starting to radicalise. And we would see that generally through online behaviours and reporting from the community. And we treat them like everyone else when we see that.

JOURNALIST: inaudible

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY MIKE BURGESS: In terms of the people who have returned, I'm confident that's the case at this stage.

JOURNALIST: inaudible

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY MIKE BURGESS:

So I'm not aware of men in camps. I'm aware of men in prison. So they're in prison, obviously I'll reserve my comments on the threats they pose to my Minister in the government when we need to answer that question.

JOURNALIST: inaudible

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY MIKE BURGESS:

Sure. Firstly, I understand people's concerns and whilst I won't go into specific details that we do, I can assure you and assure those members of the Australian community that where we see problems, they get the full attention of my organisation and we work very closely with the police. Both the Australian Federal Police and State and Territory police in dealing with problems as they arise.

JOURNALIST: inaudible

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY MIKE BURGESS:

If I may, I'd prefer to limit my remarks to the terrorism threat level and you'll have an opportunity to ask me other questions like that at my Threat Assessment next year, early next year.

Thank you. The last couple of questions here.

JOURNALIST: inaudible

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY MIKE BURGESS:

Thank you for having a good memory. It did reach parity. It's slightly less than parity. It's come off again, as in nationalist racist violent extremist has reduced slightly, so but still it's near parity, but it has reduced slightly, of course our biggest concern remains the actions of a lone actor or an individual that goes to violence with little or no warning, and that can come from either cohort.

One last question.

JOURNALIST: inaudible

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY MIKE BURGESS:

So I'm confident of the capabilities and abilities of my organisation to follow the threats as we see them. Of course, if I had any concerns, then I wouldn't share that here. I talk to my boss, the Minister, but I'm very confident of the capabilities, my people and the tools and the laws we have available to us to deal with the threats as we see them.

In terms of how we prioritise, we make tough calls every day and we go to where the highest harm is. And of course, despite the lowering of the threat level, terrorism remains a priority for my organisation, and it will get the full resources it needs as we come across problems and we work hard to discover the problem so they don't become a problem for our country.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, I'll now hand over to the Minister of Home Affairs. Minister.

MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS CLARE O'NEIL:

Good morning and Director General. Thank you for welcoming us to ASIO. Today is a good day for the national security of our country, but we remain vigilant. Terrorism doesn't stand still, and neither will we. Today we're here because ASIO is advising a change to the national terrorism threat level from PROBABLE to POSSIBLE and the most important thing that I want to do today is to pay tribute to the security and law enforcement professionals who have made this happen.

And I'd say we're here today at ASIO, I have had the opportunity over the past six months to work very closely with the people who work for this organisation, for the Australian Federal Police and State Police Organisations and others who are involved in this fight. It is a privilege because these people are brilliant at what they do.

They are methodical, they are calm and they are amongst the best security experts in the entire world. And we are very lucky in Australia that they are on the fight for us. We have had a lot of success in the fight against terrorism in our country and it's really important on a day like today to note our vigilance in the face of the future, but also to note how many lives have been saved by the work of the people that we acknowledge today.

153 people have been charged as a result of 79 counter-terrorism related operations since 2014. Since 2014, there have been 11 attacks and 21 major disruptions of imminent attack planning. Untold damage could have resulted from those attacks coming to fruition, but they didn't because of the hard work of the people who help us with this problem in Australia.

Our government listens to experts. We rely on their advice and we trust them. And I want to convey on behalf of all Australians my deep respect for the people who work on this problem, for our country, for keeping us safe. Today is a day to pay tribute to police, to our intelligence professionals and everyone involved in this fight and our community thanks you.

I said that we remain vigilant. And what I wanted to talk to you a little bit about today is how our threat problem, how our terrorism problem in this country is changing and some of the work that's being done by government to adjust our approach. The threats that we face are, we're being told today, reducing in number, but they are still very significant.

I want to go back briefly to 2014 when the terror threat level was set to PROBABLE. And just recall to your memories what the threat looked like at that time. At the height of the war on terror, we faced groups of very organised, very motivated people who would work together on one terrorism plot that would take months and sometimes years in the planning.

These were people who plugged themselves into international networks, and their aim was maximum destruction, the loss of as many lives as could occur in one attack. Now, those attacks are absolutely still possible today, but there are new trends emerging in the fight in terrorism, and we're seeing three big changes.

The first the Director-General talked about a bit before, and that is the rise of extreme nationalism and right-wing terror. So really not just those two things, but actually a proliferation in the motivations of people who are becoming radicalised and then seeking to cause violence in Australia.

The second important change is the increasing speed with which people are becoming radicalised and then moving to violence. So what the experts call the narrowing of flash to bang.

And the third is the very alarming surge of minors in our counter-terrorism caseload.

So I want to just explain a little bit more about each of those trends. So we're seeing an increase in nationalist and racist, violent extremists, with ideologically motivated groups now increasingly active in Australia. There have been regular periods where the Director-General's informed you in the past that people who have a non-religious basis for their fundamentalism are making up about half of the priority investigative subjects for ASIO.

These are people who are not just intent on spreading dangerous ideas because as the Director-General has noted, we live in a country where you're allowed to express ideas that you and I might find abhorrent. What we really worry about is the drive to violence, and we are seeing that among some of these communities of people.

The second trend I talked about was the speed of radicalisation and the move to violence.

And part of the trend here is a shift to lower technology types of attacks. So back in 2014, we were seeing, you know, sophisticated planning and resourcing that went into one attack. The Director-General has talked about what we might see more commonly these days, which is people trying to exert violence with a knife or a car, something that you might have around you in your everyday life.

And the third is the presence of minors in the caseload. So this is a very significant change and there have been times also where half of the priority investigative subjects of ASIO last year were minors. So we are seeing children 15, 14 years old, who are radicalising through a range of different means and at least indicating ideas about violence. Obviously, of huge concern to us as a country.

When you combine all these trends together, you can see quite clearly that there has been an evolution in our terrorism threat, so not only are we seeing today a terrorism threat where there are fewer people of concern, which is a good thing, we are seeing quite a different presentation where the type of attack that we might need to be preparing for and that the Director-General and I are working so hard to prevent, might be a young person who has radicalised themselves through a range of different uses, including the use of technology and the internet, and might be seeking to cause violence with a knife or a car.

Now, as you can imagine, as someone who works on the policy end of this, we need to think really carefully about whether the tools that we developed to fight the type of terrorism presentation that we saw in 2014 are most useful and relevant to us now. And one of the things I'll just point to as an example is because we are seeing so many more minors in the caseload, law enforcement is not our one and only avenue for managing that. We need to think about young people, what is driving them to radicalise and to think that violence is an option for them and moving them away and off that pathway is going to require more than the efforts of our very hard-working police forces. But thinking about their family environment, about youth and health supports that they may also need.

I share some of that because I want people to understand that although this is a really good day for the national security of our country, we've got to remain vigilant here. And part of my job in this is understanding the evolution of that threat and making sure that the policy tools, the Parliament provides to ASIO and our other law enforcement professionals remain alive to the threat that we face.

So I want to assure Australians that the Government is doing everything that we can to fight terrorism. We are well equipped to counter the threat that we face. But I say again, vigilance is the watchword here and nothing you hear this morning should give any indication that there is a skerrick less attention and concern being applied to this very important problem that our country faces.

I might wrap up there and happy to take questions and DG you want to join me up here and you can ask us, I'll pass the DG the ones relevant to him.

JOURNALIST: Inaudible

MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS CLARE O'NEIL:

Yeah. Thank you. So very important question for the country. We have had now the previous government have two attempts at creating laws which would strip citizenship of dual citizens under certain circumstances. Both of those attempts at legislating for this have been knocked out by the High Court, and those of you that watch these matters closely will know that the Alexander judgment by the High Court earlier this year essentially rendered invalid a raft of citizenship laws that that the previous government had put in place.

So what I would say is that I'm very committed to creating a regime that would seek citizenship being taken away from people who act in a way that is incomprehensible alongside their Australian citizenship. The question is how can we make a law that the High Court will believe is constitutional? There are two High Court cases in train at the moment that will allow the High Court to speak a bit more about what it sees as the constitutional limitations on such a scheme.

What I don't want to do is legislate for a scheme and have it knocked out again, because I have to tell you that does create problems for us. What it means is that citizenship has been taken from a number of people who were dual citizens. And now that that citizenship is inevitably restored by the High Court's decision. So I don't want to go through that a third time.

We need to wait till the High Court has given us a better indication of what the constitutional limits are, and then we will legislate again for that.

JOURNALIST: Inaudible

MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS CLARE O'NEIL:

Okay. So thank you, Mark. We have not made any decisions about repatriating further groups of Australians from camps in Syria. There has been one decision made by the former government in 2019 to repatriate seven children and one adult and one decision by our government earlier this year to repatriate four adults and 13 children. We will consider whether we may continue with that, but it's not, it's not a discussion or a decision that's been made so far.

There are really clear national security risks that need to be weighed here. And what I really want Australians to understand is that the women and children who are in the camps at the moment are Australian citizens. Now I say that not to make a humanitarian argument. I say that because it's really important that people understand that at some stage these people will be allowed to return to Australia.

So the question for the Australian Government and the Australian people is, do we in a planned manner bring back groups of Australians from these camps or do we do this in an unplanned way where at some point these people will be allowed to leave the camp, they will be allowed to return to the country, and I cannot constitutionally do anything to stop them.

And then we lose the ability to control the return. And perhaps most importantly, if we do not do anything about this now, then the children who are growing up in those camps, they are growing up in an environment that is unsafe, that, where they are subject to violent, radical ideology every day that tells them to hate their own country.

And the argument here is that in some instances, the better thing for us to do is to manage the return so those children can live something of a life that resembles an Australian upbringing around Australian values. So that was a decision made with regard to this group of people. With regard to where they are settling, the women and children who have been returned have been resettled with their families where they came from.

They are not all resettling in south west Sydney and I'm not going to detail the locations of course, but I think there's been a bit of misinformation about this. The people who are repatriated from those camps have been returned to where they came from.

JOURNALIST: Inaudible

MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS CLARE O'NEIL:

Well this is one of the most dangerous parts of the world. And the situation evolves frequently. I mean, DG ASIO, you may want to add to this, but it is a very dangerous part of the world. And I'm sure many of you know the statistics that in the last couple of years, many women and children who live in those camps have died there through various acts of violence. Do you want to add to that?

JOURNALIST: Inaudible

MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS CLARE O'NEIL:

They were all assessed, yes.

JOURNALIST: Inaudible

MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS CLARE O'NEIL:

Well, let me just say something general, because I don't want to get into the detail about these specific individuals. But let me just say generally that we are weighing up risks here about the risks of what may happen now, versus the risks of what might happen later. And each of the adults who was repatriated was individually assessed as low risk in this particular instance.

JOURNALIST: Inaudible

MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS CLARE O'NEIL:

Well, it's a really difficult one and it's one where we're doing a lot of work with our law enforcement partners and our intelligence partners. So I would say one of the things that we need to tackle here is about the use of the Internet and the prevalence of violent content that's on the Internet. Now, I say that almost with a half-smile, because this is a much-admired problem and every country in the world is trying to feel their way around how we manage this.

Australia has worked closely with New Zealand on the work that's been done, post-Christchurch around this, but at the moment there's no kind of one-shot policy change that we can point to that will change the shape of this dynamic. One thing that we are working on closely with our state and territory colleagues is trying to provide better support for young people who got really disconnected during COVID.

So there were, you know, we've had this period of two years where young Australians spent inordinate amounts of time outside of their normal networks on the Internet and perhaps, you know, outside of sporting clubs and schools that would normally give them some sense of structure and

support. So we're working really closely with state and federal governments to try to support young people to regain, kind of their normal life and their normal networks.

Do you want to talk a little bit more about the minors issue at all DG?

JOURNALIST: Inaudible

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF SECURITY MIKE BURGESS:

In terms of our violent extremist cohort, we've not seen Incels as a driving ideology. It's a thing in the world, but it's not something that's major in our caseload at this point in time. But you can't rule it out because as I said, during COVID, as the Minister just alluded to, you've got lots of people trapped in their house, on their iPads or computers, not getting their behaviours moderated from interaction in society or the schoolyard. And that's concerning. And these ideologies come at you from all over the place, through the Internet.

JOURNALIST: Inaudible

MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS CLARE O'NEIL:

Absolutely not. Absolutely not. And if I can say, one of the great strengths of the approach we've taken in Australia and one of the reasons why we have been so successful is because we listen to the experts and we trust the experts. One of the things that is most important to me in doing my job well is not allowing politics to get in the way of national security concerns. And that is why we allow our agencies to do the work that they need to do. Now we need Australians to trust law enforcement and trust intelligence officials, which they very much do at the moment. And part of the reason that they do, is we let people do their jobs. DG ASIO is an expert. His staff that work in this building tirelessly work for our country every single day.

And when they come to government indicating that we need to make a change like this, it will be accepted by the government every day of the week.

I think we're just going to go one more.

JOURNALIST: Inaudible

MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS CLARE O'NEIL:

Can't comment on that at the moment. Matt, there is an AFP investigation on foot at the moment, which I'm definitely not going to get in the way of.

Okay. Thanks, everyone. I think there's a there's a briefing we're about to get into. Thank you very much.